

PROJECT REPORT

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Networks and Neighbourhood: Negotiating a Gendered Social Ecology

Project duration: 3 months (June-August 2014)

Participants: Women of Khirkee Extension and other nearby localities: Hauz Rani, Khirkee Gaon, Panchsheel Vihar). Overall, 45 women from the ages of 18-30 were engaged in conversation. This number tapered off over the weeks to 35 women, who formed four groups; of these participants a few attended irregularly, so attendance at each session varied from 12 to 15 participants.

Participant backgrounds: Ethnically and culturally diverse; included domestic help, factory workers, home-makers, sellers of food items such as momos and vegetables, school-going teenagers

Dialogue and interaction sessions: 5 days per week (Monday-Friday, 6 hours per session)

Medium of communication/intervention: Hindi and English

I. Overview

Documentation of narratives shared by participants about their strongly gendered experience of local public spaces

II. Methodology and Interventions

Conversation / self-expression through

- (i) Participants making paper origami
- (ii) Dialogue at facilitator-organized tea-and-snacks parties for participants
- (iii) Participant inscription of a wall map of local neighbourhoods

III. Artist/Facilitator Observations and Recommendations

I. Overview

I first explored Khirkee in 2008-09 for my Khoj-supported project *City [In]visible* through which I documented the changes in the locality arising from socio-economic changes in the local community. The transformation was evident, caused by the influx of a range of workers and artisan migrants from other parts of India, who found employment in small local workshops as well as in the large malls and private high-specialty hospital just down the road. Long-established Khirkee families began to rent living space to the migrants, the first outsiders to be assimilated into the area, and have since continued to profit from steadily increasing and now-cohesive migrant presence. This has also encouraged local micro-enterprises: eating places and shops supplying essential items such from the migrants' places of origin, as well as crucial labour-related services such as money transfer for migrants who send home part of their earnings.

Since that time, further significant change has taken place in Khirkee. A large number of local residents left the neighbourhood, old workshops were demolished and multi-storey buildings were erected on those sites, and more groups of migrants of different ethnicities moved in. Khirkee now has a cosmopolitan and multicultural character, and is home to people from north, eastern, north-eastern and south India, as well as refugee families from Afghanistan and Iran. Engaging with Khirkee once again through *Networks and Neighbourhood*, my experience of the locality is very different from five years ago. While the built environment looks essentially the same, thronging and congested, the community has overtly diversified and expanded. The narrow lanes with their small shops lit by low-watt bulbs bustle late into the evening, with a range of local residents, including Africans and Afghans, crowding around the kiosks of vendors selling street food, vegetables, tea, groceries, cigarettes, etc. Construction labourers, coolies, sweepers, washermen, barbers, peddlers, stand around at leisure, socializing. Men dominate public space

and daily business in Khirkee, and my project aims to explore and document how such spaces are used by local women – their concept and experience of it, what is socially and culturally prohibited or permitted to them in relation to public space, how they use available public space, and how they create their own particular gendered spaces of community within the available public area.

These issues came to mind as I walked each day through the lanes of Khirkee and nearby Hauz Rani, observing that most of the women I could see going to and from were ‘foreigners’, primarily Africans and *burqa*-clad Afghans, faces averted, hurrying past; some women from the north-east returning to their rooms from their workplaces in the malls; and some women who worked from early morning to late evening as domestic help in middle-class homes in nearby colonies. At no time of the day does one see local women at the grocery shops, meat shops, mobile phone shops, tailor shops or any of the many and varied tiny establishments offering a spectrum of goods and services to residents. Apart from the social conservatism and practices of gender segregation that restrict women’s mobility, it is also a fact that Delhi is notoriously unsafe for women. Sexual harassment and violent sexual crime are a continual threat for women everywhere in the city’s public spaces, especially in low-income localities such as Khirkee which have poor infrastructure, dark and confusing lanes, failing or non-existent street lights, and are everywhere overcrowded with men.

II. Methodology and Interventions

(i) Making paper origami

Participants: 20 women from Khirkee Gaon and Panchsheel Vihar

Age: 20-65 years

Duration: 2 weeks

Site: Local park

The park became a space for discussion about gender-related issues, the origami

exercise stimulating an exchange of views about the restrictions in participants' lives. Most women are occupied indoors all day, doing housework and family duties. A few do go out but mostly to do house-related tasks such as taking their children to school and picking them up, and to buy vegetables and groceries if vendors do not bring these to their doorsteps. The evening hour in the park is literally the only free time and space in their entire day. While women did participate in the park discussions, they were actually quite reluctant to talk in detail. My sense was that the long-term residents were not comfortable being open about their lives in the presence of those in the group who were recent migrants, mostly from UP and Bihar. When I asked if I could meet them privately in their homes, they all said this would not be permitted by the men in their families, and even if they did take me to their homes I might be treated very rudely and with suspicion.

For my first activity I brought along coloured origami papers and colour sketch pens. We sat on benches in a circle so that it was easy to chat. In earlier discussions they had talked about how they negotiated public spaces in their village environments, how it contrasted with how they negotiated public space in their daily lives in the city. They had also discussed how social rules had to be negotiated differently in different spaces; even simple things such as tattoos on their arms could be seen as violating social and family convention.

The origami intervention focused on the idea that each woman experienced variable mobility through the day. I first asked them to make origami with the paper. They were all enthusiastic about this, and the younger women helped the older ones who found it a problem to shape the paper. Meanwhile some other local women, non-participants, came by and stood around, trying to understand the skill of manipulating the paper, and asking the group why they needed to do it. The second step was to write on the origami four words connected to the familiar spaces the participants travelled to in the morning – e.g., kitchen, bathroom, dairy, threshold to buy vegetables from vendors, etc. They then wrote eight words connected to the local spaces they travelled to all day, e.g., school, market, park, clinic, etc. After this there was an animated 90-minute discussion about how, when and where women could move around in the locality, with and without restrictions.

The participants were initially confused because prior to this activity they had never had to scrutinize their daily mobility patterns. I then asked each participant to

identify a space personally indispensable and visited frequently each day. In the following sessions, each woman narrated her relationship to that space and explained why it was significant to her daily experience. The women also discussed how in urban neighbourhoods of earlier times, *sanjha chulha* ('community oven') was a prominent space used by local women for cooking as well as for socializing – the space thus fulfilled more than just a practical need. The custom has more or less died out today, since city life is now much more individualistic and the idea of community itself has changed significantly.

(ii) Dialogue at facilitator-organized tea-and-snacks parties

Participants: 10-15 in each group

Age: 13-35 years

Site: Khoj Studio

Duration: 2 weeks

I arranged for a series of tea-and-snacks parties at Khoj for two weeks, inviting local women of Khirkee Extension, so that we could chat in a more intimate way, in a safe space away from the street, their workplaces and homes. I was finding it difficult to interact with the women as their busy work schedules did not enable them to take time for any other activity during the day. The tea parties allowed them to socialize and gave me the opportunity to talk in depth and build up a relationship with them. My previous fieldwork in Khirkee had taught me that women always felt respected and responded well when they were given a special invitation. My sense is that since their personal identities are subsumed for the most part within their family and community, they enjoyed being singled out for special treatment. The tea sessions at the studio also enabled them to relax and speak out without demands being made upon them, in a space away from their normal domestic sphere of cooking, chores, child-rearing, elder care and other duties.

The women who attended were from different backgrounds. Some worked in factories, some did business or vending on the streets, some worked as domestic help, and there were also some school-going girls as well as teenage dropouts. The idea of bringing them together was for them to freely share their experiences, describe the extent of their mobility; narrate how they made time for themselves away from monotonous daily routines, and how they negotiated various kinds of public space in this process. These women also described their experience of public space (apart from their work environments) in relation to specific and familiar words associated with objects, people and activities in the locality: for instance, temple, market, *chabutra* (raised platform), hospital, *nukkad* (street corner), *saheli* (friend), *chhat* (terrace), *dukaan* (shop), *gali* (lane), TV, *mulaqat* (meeting/encounter), *gupshup* (gossip/chitchat), *baat-cheet* (conversation), bus, bus stand, *padosi* (neighbor), *charpai* (rope cot), *chatai* (mat), etc.

Group 1

Rabia, 50, inhabitant of Hauz Rani-Khirkee for the past 35 years, is currently living on the periphery of Khirkee Extension, on the threshold of Press Enclave Road, an area under threat from developers. She talked about the changed *mahaul* ('atmosphere'/'environment') in Hauz Rani and Khirkee. Lata (22) narrated how her mother Ranjana, 45, a *dhobi/presswali* for 14 years here, bought a *thikana* (kiosk) from someone in the locality and started working in a Khirkee *gali*. They talk about how they deal with customers, especially the new groups of migrants from Khirkee Gaon in Malviya Nagar, and how the overall sense of security has improved with the development of the mall, the district courts complex, the hospital at walking distance from Khirkee. Those huge buildings are busy late into the night and there are many people around all the time so women did not fear walking along the road after work in the evening. However they did not really approve of the increasing number of 'outsiders' settling in Khirkee, even while this was good for their business. Gayatri, Seema and Pushpa all live close to one another in small rooms in the same lane of Khirkee Extension that houses construction workers. Gayatri is from Bihar, and sells vegetables along with her husband. Pushpa is from the north-east; she works as a domestic help. Seema, 45, is also from the north-east but has been domiciled in Delhi for a long time; she makes momos and sells them on the street. The three women narrated their experiences of scraping together a living in

the locality from day to day, a challenge because the public space is so male-dominated. This factor, according to them, will be less oppressive if women become more visibly present and assertive in public space – for instance, if most of the roadside vending were to be done by women, selling goods from handcarts.

Group 2

I met women who work for daily wages in a local factory of Khirkee Extension. They work 7 days a week and put in 9-hour workdays, along with which they have a full load of household work and family duties. These women are 20-35 years old and they travel daily by bus or walk to the factory in Khirkee Extension from the resettlement areas of Dakshinpuri, Sangam Vihar and Khanpur; one woman comes from Krishna Park. They managed to use their 30-minute break to come to the session. It was rushed, yet I found it more productive since they were able to relax and speak freely outside the regulative environment of their workplace and constant policing by their shift managers. Shabana, (28), spoke about her cherished *saheli* Nasreen, (27), who lives at a distance from the locality. Laxmi, (30), is a most enthusiastic attendee and discussant at the tea-and-snacks sessions. Her focus is on the word ‘market’ in association with her experience of public space. Manisha, 20, has recently found work in Khirkee. She comes from a conservative family, and apart from going to work she is not allowed to step into any public space, and not even allowed to socialize in neighbours’ homes. She is restricted from talking to people at the door and from spending time on the terrace of her home. Manisha’s idea of mobility and her relationship with public space is confined to her experience of the factory.

Group 3

From the beginning I was very keen to engage with the African and other resident foreign women who can be frequently observed in the lanes of Khirkee. However, it was difficult to establish contact as they are nervous of speaking to a stranger, and also seem socially inhibited and shy. They did not respond to my tea-session invitations. Fortunately a fellow artist-practitioner who had been working with Khoj for a long time and was familiar with the area put me in touch with Josephine, 28, a woman from Cameroon. I met her at her house in Khirkee Extension; she too refused to come for the tea sessions. Despite our mutual language difficulty – her

mother tongue is French – we were able to communicate well. Josephine has been living here for one year and supports herself by running a kitchen as a home-based business, supplying meals to African residents in Khirkee who eat at the kitchen and also buy take-out. She narrated her experience of overt and subtle racism in Khirkee, where she is treated rudely in the streets and also by shopkeepers. Hence she prefers to go regularly for her kitchen supplies to INA market, at some distance from Khirkee. She finds everything she needs there and has a good relationship with the INA traders.

Group 4

I met a group of school-going girls as well teenage dropouts (ages 13-18) in Swechcha, an NGO situated in Khirkee Gaon. I invited 12 teenagers for the tea sessions, in order to document how this age group negotiates public space in the Khirkee Gaon-Malviya Nagar area, and how they see Khirkee and Hauz Rani. These young girls from Jagadamba Camp described their notions of freedom and the way they try to create their own spaces so they can experience some social autonomy. For instance, Rani, 16, from a family of Bihari migrants, says the public space in which she is most comfortable is the common terrace, she finds it the most safe and wonderful place to meet her friends. The girls' general opinion about Khirkee and Hauz Rani is that though the lanes are dark and congested, they like to go there as often as they can, to meet friends; and because it is so crowded, the girls can find ways to evade the vigilant eyes of their chaperones.

(iii) Participant inscription of a wall map of local neighbourhoods

Participants: 5-12 in each group

Age: 13-35

Site: Khoj Studio

Duration: 1 week

At the end of the project, my informal findings were that the women of this area were not only excluded from public space, which continued to be dominated by men, but also struggled to assert their presence in that space due to a conventional socio-cultural ethos that restricted them internally as well as externally, for instance in terms of their aspirations as well as their mobility. My final intervention was to bring all the participants together in a visual format: a collectively created symbolic cartography that would be an inscription of their subjective experience of public space, their imaginations, their perceptions, emotions, etc. I created a huge grid of the local area on a studio wall and invited the participants to fill it in, shape it into a map not only of their own neighbourhoods but also of their subjectivity – their view of their entitlements, the desire to create and allocate their own safe public spaces in the city. I supplied crayons, pens, markers and paints, and the participants enthusiastically drew and wrote themselves into this map, narrating and projecting their sensibilities in a unique manner.

III. Artist/Facilitator Observations

My intention was to continuously stimulate expression through dialogue and active listening, motivated by an ethic of sharing that sought to expand the way participants experienced and negotiated deeply gendered public spaces in Khirkee and surrounding localities. There was no intention to resolve any problems and or to impose concepts. This practice of open-ended collaboration, in which the women primarily and freely drew upon their own subjectivity and knowledge bases, elicited remarkably sophisticated responses from participants throughout the project.

Initially scheduled for three months, the project needs an extension to a longer term (minimum 1 year), given that each session built incrementally upon content generated through activities in the previous session. Given the qualitative nature of this research, one has to devote sufficient time to developing contact, building trust, cultivating rapport and systematically engaging with local, migrant and foreign women, and through a practice of active listening, work individually with each participant in order to document her ideas and imagination. The scope and findings of the project clearly indicate it has the potential to be further developed and creatively documented, with an in-depth focus on the way women conceptualize

and scrutinize their relationship to public space. Refining this into a rich and textured sociological narrative would require more time.
